Our Freedoms

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Essays and Stories from India's Best Writers

Edited by

Nilanjana S. Roy

juggernaut

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To our freedom fighters, then and now

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Foreword

Nilanjana S. Roy

One night in the biting cold of the winter of 2019, huddled in a fog so dense with pollution and the last drifting traces of tear gas that they could barely see one another, a group of students and women shared their dreams. They were out in the cold to defend two ideas, one sewn to the other: of belonging to a place and a country, and of a promise made at the time of the country's independence, a wishful promise of azadi, an elusive but always possible state of freedom.

This was not at the famous protest in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, but in another part of the city. That winter, the discriminatory provisions of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the National Register of Citizens law, sharp as a knife aimed at the collective throat of the country's Muslims, had sparked some of the largest mass protests across the country. The women who led this all-night sit-in faced reprisals from state forces that were all the more brutal and unrestrained

because of the lack of media attention. A few knew each other, but most were strangers, coming together in solidarity to protest the new citizenship law.

In the national capital, the events of the past few weeks had been tumultuous, one protest springing up after another, police crackdowns following in their wake. The streets swelled with songs and slogans; in the aftermath of clashes or police beatings, the pavements were sometimes streaked with bloodstains.

Many had placed their lives and bodies on the line to stay up all night, to talk and read, to share their fears and hopes for themselves and for the future of India. Sleep was one of the several casualties of that winter. Few had a peaceful night's rest, even when they took a break at home.

Most nights, people discussed the Constitution and citizenship, or sought news from the many parts of the country, from Kashmir to Assam and Uttar Pradesh, where news of severe repressions, of beatings, torture, mass imprisonment, disappearances, seeped through the few cracks in a wall of silence.

One evening, the impromptu adda was halted so that everybody could help a young mother pick tiny splinters of glass and plastic fragments out of her baby's tiny feet. The mother and child had been caught unawares when the programme – the singing of patriotic and revolutionary songs, the reading of the Preamble to the Constitution in Hindi and Urdu, some guest speakers talking of Dr B.R. Ambedkar and

pluralism – was disrupted by goons from a nameless political party. (It had a name, but nobody at this gathering wanted to say it aloud.)

On other nights, the discussion veered to the slender but growing possibility of building solidarities across barriers of religion, class and caste, clasping hands despite the many divisions cemented into Indian lives. Often, people spoke of the waves of hate directed by national television channels at different groups of selected victims: liberals, academics, independent-minded universities, Muslims, Christians, other minorities, creative artists and writers, or anyone who questioned the ruling establishment.

It was past midnight when Zahreen,* a lively twenty-one-year-old who hoped to set up her own biotech company some day, said, 'Tell me what you dream about in this time,' and one by one, the group started to share.

Razia, the fifty-year-old mother of three, dreamed every night that the windows of her house were smashed, and that someone she couldn't see was breaking their front door down with an axe. Vipin, a seventeen-year-old medical student, said he dreamed of a suffocating cloud that first choked him, then spread across the country.

One young girl had the same recurring nightmare: she and her friend fled, running through empty streets, clutching one another's hands, but gradually she lost hold of her friend's

*All names changed to protect the identity of protesters

hand, and she could not find her way back to her again. Someone dreamed of searching through a discarded suitcase for lost papers, someone that he returned home to find that everyone he loved had mysteriously disappeared, their shopping bags and tins of baby milk knocked to the floor.

Zahreen herself sometimes woke up at night convinced that she had heard a loud explosion and that a great monster was roaming silently in the alleys of her neighbourhood. The last one to share was Khadija, seventy-two, who was well known for her ability to produce a seemingly endless supply of biscuits and chocolates from the folds of her burqa.

'Every night since this began,' she said, 'I have dreamed the same dream. They go to [Ferozeshah] Kotla and other places, and they drag out the djinns of Delhi, all of them, one by one, catching their smoke and fire in gunnysacks. The sacks wriggle on the ground as the djinns try to break free, but they are held fast, and then bruises come out on the sides of the sacks, you can see them. Then they are bundled into one of their vans, and then – oh, it depends. Sometimes the sacks are shot and sometimes they are thrown into the river, but by the end of it, all the djinns are gone.'

The group was silent and the air felt frozen, dank with pollution and fear.

'Wait,' said Khadija. 'Many nights, my dream doesn't finish here. Whatever is done to the djinns, their forms break apart into smoke and blood, and fill the air and the water and the earth. And slowly, everyone who lives on the earth

and breathes this air and drinks that water, they also sicken, everyone suffering from the same plague. That's it, that's my dream.'

Ten days later, a wave of violence, instigated by incendiary speeches made by members of the ruling party who faced no serious legal consequences then or later, devastated several mohallas in north-east Delhi. Some called these the Delhi riots; others called them pogroms.

And a month later, in March 2020, the pandemic reached India, freezing everything in place for a while. That summer, the air felt heavy, still, unfree.

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In 1946, a year before India wrested independence from the British, paying a blood price for freedom with Partition's jagged lines of severance, the film *Humjoli* was screened in theatres across the country.

Noor Jehan sang, *'Ye desh ye desh humara pyara / Hindustan jahan se nyara / leke rahenge hum azadi / woh din aane wala hai / woh din aane wala hai / leke rahenge hum azadi . . .'* In partial translation: this beloved country of ours, we will not stop until we've taken our freedom, that day will come.

Many years later, the azadi chant would return to India via a Pakistani feminist song that went in part, 'My sisters want their freedom'. In the late 1980s Kamla Bhasin created her own feminist version, where women sought freedom

from all that held them back. 'My sisters want freedom, my daughter wants freedom, every woman's slogan is freedom. From endless violence, azadi, from helpless silence, azadi, from patriarchy, azadi, from hierarchy, azadi, for breathing freely, azadi, for moving freely, azadi . . .'

That word, and that chant, winds in and out of history's alleys, used in anti-caste movements, in women's marches, but also in all kinds of protests – sometimes, more controversially, pressed into service by separatists.

But on the streets of Delhi, the version that rang out was closer to Noor Jehan's lines in the song. It shone with love and with the determination to make something of the founding promises, to create a country based on healing the wounds of the past, not on creating new divisions and stirring up ancient grievances.

We'll take back that freedom,
Freedom from attempts to create differences between us,
Freedom from hate and violence,
What do we want? Freedom.
We'll wrest it back, our freedom.
It's our right, freedom.
That beloved freedom,
Shout it loudly: freedom.

The *Modern Review* records the moments of India's independence in its August 1947 issue – at least 200,000

people swarmed around the Council House to celebrate the instant when Lord Mountbatten addressed the Sovereign Constituent Assembly, and the national flag was unfurled over the dome, the crowds cheering as the tricolour fluttered in the air. At midnight, the Indian Constituent Assembly passed a resolution assuming power for the governance of India. When Dr Rajendra Prasad read out the pledge, the formalities were followed by the blowing of conch shells and cries of 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!' before Jawaharlal Nehru rose to make his historic speech.

But by September the *Review* was recording the grim realities before the nation: the food crisis, the reports from both sides of the border of the beginning of the carnage that accompanied Partition, the trains pulling into Lahore and Amritsar with their silent, grisly cargo of the slaughtered.

It can be comforting to read unfiltered accounts of your country's past: they cut through the myths that surround any nation's founding. Independence came after centuries of uprisings and rebellions against the British; it was hard-wrested.

Late one night at India Gate, I listened to a young generation recite the promises in the Preamble, their eyes lit with hope and fervour: 'We, the People, give to ourselves this Constitution . . .'

Liberty, equality, fraternity were supposed to be gifts. I took those words for granted through most of my adult life, assuming that the country would always have the first, would

continue to strive for the second and would never completely abandon the third.

And here we are, with all three of these extraordinary, moving promises made by the country's founders to their people in jeopardy at this juncture in the nation's history. How daring their dreams seem now – and how much trust they placed in the generations ahead, the leaders who held power over their country's fate, and were free to ignore these three essential, fragile founding values.

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Another song of freedom, from Jharkhand:

Sidhu, why are you bathed in blood
Kanhu, why do you cry 'hul hul'?
For our people we have bathed in blood
For the trader-thieves have robbed us
Of our land . . .

The first rebellions against the British were led by the Santhals and the Bhils, the Kols and the Mundas, as anthropologists like Dr Alpa Shah and others have recorded. The first stirrings of a desire for independence, the first banners of revolt against the Raj, were not driven by a love of a nation that did not then exist, but by a deep love and claim over the land. In the country's collective memory today, these

waves of resistance have almost been erased, though these are where the seeds of freedom first took root. But in every tribe that sent its warriors up against an empire mightier and more resourceful than they could have imagined, these are living memories, preserved in song and thought. The idea of 'hul', roughly translatable as 'victory to revolution', as a just struggle against oppression has stayed alive for three centuries.

One of the biggest uprisings against the East India Company was the Santhal Hul of 1855. In 1824 the British demarcated the Santhal Pargana, calling it the Damin-i-Koh; then, as now, those who worked the land, listened to the breathing of its forests, worshipped the spirits who preserved the rivers and the earth's bounty lost their rights to the most precious part of their universe.

By 1855 the Santhals had been dispossessed, cruel taxes forced upon them. Four brothers – Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav – and their two sisters – Phulo and Jhano – of the Murmu clan staged a fierce, one-month war against the Raj and its agents. Sidhu and Kanhu were captured and hanged from a tree on 26 July, in Bhognadih, ratted out to the British by one of their own; Chand and Bhairav were murdered in Bahraich. This rebellion, one of many across the provinces of British India, took the lives of over 15,000 tribespeople, and entire villages were put to the torch. In some versions, it is sung that the sisters Phulo and Jhano rode into a British encampment and cut down twenty-one British soldiers before they too were killed.

Sometimes it feels as though all countries keep dismembering their own histories, forgetting and erasing too much. And perhaps none of them, from India to the United States of America or Turkey or Brazil, can move forward until they have remembered all that is pushed aside in favour of a dominant version.

Freedom is not simple. To claim it, you must know what came before. Every so often, the powerful forget this. A regime, a political movement, a strongman can briefly or not so briefly create a history shaped to their satisfaction, and that history can be dominant, for a while. But what really happened cannot be changed; the lives that people lived, the causes they believed in, what they fought for, what they yearned for, have a reality to them, and it keeps breaking through. Sometimes dormant for decades, the past can surface in the most unexpected ways.

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Our Freedoms, this collection of essays, short stories, poems and personal memoir, was suggested to me by Chiki Sarkar, Juggernaut's publisher, as a way of exploring what this particular moment in India might hold for the future. We asked a range of writers, across generations and genres, some basic but increasingly urgent questions: What did freedom mean to them? With political and other freedoms steadily shrinking in India, what might the promises made by the nation's founders mean to Indians today?

Their answers have an immediacy and urgency. The range of their responses, some written into the heat of this moment, some contemplative and thoughtful, are surprising and sometimes heartening. Though this does not attempt to be a serious academic exercise, I hope *Our Freedoms* might persuade other editors, writers and scholars to collect their own set of dialogues and reactions.

As an anthology, this does not attempt to be a direct response to the protests or their aftermath – from Aligarh to Delhi, students and their leaders have been arrested and jailed under the strangling provisions of an anti-terror law that denied them the basic right to bail or an immediate trial. But the winter of 2019, and the events that led up to it, left their mark on many writers from Raghu Karnad and Rana Ayyub to Snigdha Poonam and the poet Akhil Katyal, though their accounts are also reminders of other conflagrations of communal violence from Independence to this decade.

Vivek Shanbhag, Karthika Naïr, Roshan Ali, Amit Chaudhuri and Amitabha Bagchi elected to send in short stories and unsettling poems, some surreal, some hyper-real. In short essays by Aanchal Malhotra, Salil Tripathi, Suketu Mehta, moments of resistance – underground radio stations, the Emergency, another bend in the river of Gujarati history – are explored, voices reaching out from their time to our own.

Annie Zaidi's powerful essay, 'Bread, Cement, Cactus', is a reminder that to claim belonging is an act of freedom, independent of what the state or rulers might do; Rana

Ayyub explains why and how she chooses hope, in the face of a barrage of constant hatred directed against Muslims, especially those who fearlessly speak out. From his state of involuntary exile, Aatish Taseer writes of Modi's India and his own relationship with the country. Many writers chose to explore freedom through the old, deep fault lines of caste and gender and the betrayal of many promises of liberation made to both, from Yashica Dutt in her searing personal essay, 'The Freedom Exchange', to Perumal Murugan examining how caste controls every public space, and T.M. Krishna running up and down the scales of Raga Swaraj. Priyanka Dubey writes eloquently of terrible injustices, of every woman's personal freedom struggle, and the need to forgive.

In three magisterial essays, Romila Thapar re-examines the idea of India – always under threat, sometimes robust; Gyan Prakash asks what freedom would mean for the Bhuinya bonded labourers of Bihar, unless it also includes dismantling inequality; and Pratap Bhanu Mehta attempts a history of freedom itself, from philosophy to politics. And Menaka Guruswamy and Gautam Bhatia return to the Constitution, from different angles, both caught by the dream of fraternity, imperfectly realized or roughly shoved aside, but still carrying a thread of hope.

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It took many years to understand that the opposite of freedom is not incarceration: it is slavery. The politics of hatred have triumphed, in our country as in many parts of the once-free world. As an emotion, hatred can feel liberating – it frees people from the constraints of having to work at love for the stranger, kindness towards those not your kin, fraternity to those whose ways are not yours. It is hard work, imagining and creating a country in which every citizen might truly feel or claim their many, complex, essential freedoms and identities.

But hatred is slavery. It traps first haters and then entire countries, shrivelling their souls as they lose their guiding angels, their djinns of benevolence, and shoving them into a narrow cage. You can either build a Republic of Inclusion or a Republic of Exclusion. To do the first is far more difficult. It requires empathy, the ability to see that the needs of those with very different lives from yours are as important as your own, and humility, the ability to see beyond the privileges of being 'upper' caste or a member of a majority religion or community, of being wealthy or owning land or having access to education.

A Republic of Inclusion demands that you exercise both your imagination and your compassion. It is so much easier to exclude, to say that this one or that one does not belong, and to set little fires everywhere, forgetting the hopes, the dreams and the promises the founders of this country made to the people. It is a great deal easier to destroy freedoms than to create and share them.

The future for India often seems grim. But among the ads for Filaria, Oatine Snow cream, Calso-Phosphorin for Tuberculosis and Swadeshi Floral Essence that show up in the pages of the *Modern Review* for August 1947, there is one by the makers of Rhino Genzies that I cut out and kept.

A genzie (spelled genjee in some versions) is the humblest of garments – a light cotton vest, called a banian in Hindi. 'Whatever may be your religion and nationality,' the ad says persuasively, 'and status of life, surely you would prefer our Rhino Brand Genzies.' Perhaps freedom should be offered like that – the most everyday of commodities, available to all, regardless of their caste, creed or status, to be worn as you go about your business.

Many thanks to the contributors, who dealt with rounds of edits with remarkable patience, to our miraculous editor Jaishree Ram Mohan, our typesetter Ajith Kumar and our proofreader Shyama Warner, who kept this anthology from breaking its already overflowing bounds, and whose sharp eyes and warm hearts helped to see *Our Freedoms* through to the finish line.